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SKIP, TAKE A PICTURE, RECORD IT!

Helke Sander

I met Skip Norman in film school. We were both in the dffb's very first class in 1966. Right away, he was camera assistant on my first two films, on *Silvo* (1966) and also on *Subjektivität* (1966–67). So we had already shot together in 1966 because we all helped each other out. That's how the training was at the time.

The first thing I remember is the experience that made it onto the cover of *Frauen und Film* issue 5. It was 1975. The Federal Constitutional Court had overturned the law permitting an abortion within the first three months of pregnancy.¹ There was a demonstration at the Gedächtniskirche where flyers were being handed out on whose masthead stood Alexandra Kollontai, Frauenstraße 1 in Kreuzberg. I was there filming with one of the first video cameras, which I had borrowed from Michael Geißler. But I had already put it away because the protest was not particularly interesting. But then the fire department came because the demonstrators threw a bucket of red paint on the steps of the Gedächtniskirche. A fire fighter dipped his forefinger in the red paint, which was still wet, and sniffed it. I don't know if he tasted it too. I ran to the car and grabbed my equipment again. A lot of people were watching who were kind of there for the thrill. One of the firemen—meanwhile, the police had also arrived—wiped up the paint, which had spread out a little bit more. It was all rather strange. There were flyers lying everywhere. In any case, the police came over to me and arrested me, as the

¹ *Editor's note:* Also called *Fristenlösung*: in 1974, following a bill proposed by the SPD and FDP concerning abortion, the Bundestag voted for the model of a so-called *Fristenlösung* allowing an abortion to be approved within the first three months of a pregnancy. Federal states where the CDU and CSU held office brought a lawsuit to the supreme court intended to declare the *Fristenlösung* unconstitutional. In 1975, the court voted in favor of this opinion.

leader. Just then, I saw Skip watching from the crowd. I shouted: “Skip, take a picture, record it!” Because he always had a few still cameras hanging around his neck. He did that and then they arrested him right away too. We were only able to talk for about two minutes. He said he had just come from America and gotten off at Bahnhof Zoo and took a walk around the block to get used to the place and then stuck around this crowd of people. It was already a very unusual situation, I had not seen him in several years. We were both taken to the police station behind Bahnhof Zoo and were locked up in different cells there. It took insanely long, a few hours, before I could call a lawyer. But the people standing around at the Gedächtniskirche who had witnessed everything had gotten upset that we were arrested and immediately organized a demonstration to the police station. This was initiated by a CDU party member. Later on, the lawyer Nikola Becker got us released. The whole story went on and on because the unions got involved and it led to a small inquiry in the Bundestag from FDP party members Gerhart Baum and Burkhard Hirsch. In the end, the trial turned out like this: Because I was not a regular employee at the SFB or another radio station or newspaper, but freelance, it meant I was filming as a hobby and the police therefore had the right to confiscate the tapes. I never got the half-inch videotapes back.

Skip Norman had already left before the trial started. The trial was against—in alphabetical order—Alexandra Kollontai, who they spent a long time looking for. Then the lawyer Schily pointed out to them that she had been buried for this or that many years at the Kremlin Wall. The whole thing fell to pieces because everything on the flyer was fake. On the masthead was Frauenstraße 1 in Kreuzberg, where Alexandra Kollontai supposedly lived, but that didn’t exist either.

I had a similar formative experience with Skip. It was in 1967 during the Six Days War. Enzo Edschmid, Skip and I were sitting in the café near the film school on Theodor-Heuss-Platz. We were discussing Israel and the war and all kinds of other things. Then Skip suddenly said that we shouldn’t say “Nxxxx”² anymore. It would be considered discriminatory. Enzo and I objected: “Why not?” We didn’t use the discriminatory nxxxx. Skip said that the Black Panthers now want to enforce that we say “*Schwarz*” (black) instead. We were grumbling a bit. But since Skip was our friend, we promised him we would only call him and others “*Schwarze*” if it ever became necessary at all.

² *Editors’ note:* Helke Sander prefers that the N-word is written out. She has nevertheless agreed to this published version.

In my film *Brecht die Macht der Manipulateure* (1968), Skip reads a long, off-screen text by Frantz Fanon, from the cameraman's position. I found it was a little too long but also thought that he should really have his say. He was adamant the passage be included.

He was very cooperative. We could always talk about everything. It was a sign of the times that we discussed a tremendous amount and you were allowed to have different opinions. And we got closer that way.

I especially like Skip's short 16mm film with the white screen: *Cultural Nationalism* (1969). He made it for the Black Panthers. They wanted a political film from him, and in my opinion, it really is one. However, an important Black Panther Group in Copenhagen didn't know what to make of it, they had something entirely different in mind. More militant. Not a dot—which could also be mistaken for a somewhat damaged screen—that grows bigger and bigger over ten minutes until it can be recognized as a black kid in the snow, looking at the camera and walking by. It's my favorite film of his. I'm also very fond of the camera movements in his very first film with the couple: *Riffi* (1966).

From a conversation with Madeleine Bernstorff, March 16, 2021

Translated by Ted Fendt.

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